WASHTENAW IMPRESSIONS

Published occasionally by the
Washtenaw Historical Society

Vol. XII, No. 1 Ann Arbor, Michigan Nov. , 1954

BACKGROUNDS OF MICHIGAN INDIAN HISTORY AND FOLK LORE

By Emerson Frank Greenman
Curator, Division of the Great Lakes,
Museum of Anthropology, and Associate
Professor of Anthropology, University
of Michigan

The history of the American Indian in Michigan is largely the story of three different tribes: Ottawa, Chippewa, and Potawatomi, all Algonquian-speaking groups that occupied both peninsulas at the time of the discovery of the Great Lakes region by the French in the 1600's. Their area lay between lands occupied by two other well known tribes, the Sioux on the west and the Iroquois to the east, both with languages and customs differing from the Michigan tribes. The regions immediately to the north and south of Michigan were also Algonquianterritory. The Chippewa, or Ojibway, lived mainly in the Upper Peninsula, the Potawatomi in the southwestern part of the Lower Peninsula, the Ottawa occuping the rest of the Lower Peninsula. This is a fairly accurate description of the situation even today for the 7000 or 8000 Indians of the State. But 120 years ago, when the first agricultural settlers came in from New England and New York, the Indians were on the move more than they are now, so that bands of any of the three tribes might be found far from their customary areas. Chief Tonquish, for example, whose village was in Wayne County near the Washtenaw line, was a Potawatomi. At this time, too, the Huron, an Iroquois-speaking tribe closely identified with both peninsulas of Michigan after 1650, lived mainly around Wyandotte south of Detroit. They have given their name to the chief river of Washtenaw County, but it is apparently a French name, because they called themselves "Wendat," from which comes "Wyandotte." The name "Washtenaw" is derived from the Algonquian, its original meaning (as far as I have been able to learn) "far country," with Detroit as the point of departure. The early French applied the name to the Grand River, and its choice for this present County was purely arbitrary, - at the same time fortunate, for it preserved a word that has a worth-while history.

The three Algonquian tribes of Michigan speak dialects of the same language. Those of the Ottawa and Chippewa are almost identical, and they have supplied most of the Indian place-names of the State. Michigan Indians still use their native language among themselves, even in referring to cities like Sault Ste. Marie, or to each of the Great Lakes themselves. But not so in the case of "Detroit." The

first Indian name recorded for Detroit is "Tsughsagrondie," evidently an Iroquois word. It was never used after 1700, and most Detroiters are quite unaware of their narrow escape. It was the Ottawa or Chippewa that gave the word "Kalamazoo" to the world, and the world was not long in rhyming it with "Timbuktu." It has become a fabulous word, and despite the legend of an Indian romance based upon a clumsy translation, the word in its original form, as first used by white people, is translated "He who is inconvenienced by smoke in his lodge." Just why that phrase became the name for a place I do not know.

Another famous name on the map of Michigan is Mackinaw. The original form, in use up to a century ago was "Michilimackinac," and it was applied to the Straits as a whole. The story most often heard and read in histories is that it referred to the skyline of Mackinac Island, which to the Indians resembled a "Great Turtle." This seems to be a combination of legend and someone's attempt at translating the Indian word. The Indians give a different story. Andrew J. Blackbird, in his History of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, derives the name from the remnant of a tribe living on the present Mackinac Island before 1492, when they became allies of the Ottawa then living in their ancient home, Manitoulin Island, Ontario. The name of this tribe was given by Blackbird as "Mishi-ue-mackinawgo." A few years ago I was discussing the word Mackinaw with Mrs. Gus McGregor, of Birch Island Reserve, an Ojibway reservation just north of Manitoulin Island. She gave practically the same word as the origin of Michilimackinac, but translated it as "elk road," referring to the habit of the elk of crossing over the ice from the Upper to the Lower Peninsula in winter. This must have been a familiar winter scene around the Straits. I have heard of it from other people, referring to moose rather than elk, down to the detail of the hoofs cutting into the ice and scattering sparkling fragments. These Indian explanations have an authentic ring, and I prefer them, but the historical account cannot be thrown out altogether. Both could be right, based on different informants at different times, for the Ottawa and Chippewa words for turtle and road are nearly the same.

Andrew J. Blackbird was an Ottawa Indian of Cross Village, in Emmet County, and from 1858 was for many years U. S. Court Interpreter at Harbor Springs. In 1856 he told the Indian Agent at Detroit his intention to avail himself of Government money to attend the University of Michigan. He was not encouraged by that official, and was told he had voted the wrong ticket that year. So he took the matter to Governor Cass, who favored the plan but suggested the Ypsilanti State Normal School instead. He enrolled at Ypsilanti, but left after three months because of "insufficient allowance." He first published his History of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, with a grammar of the language, in 1887. It was printed in Ypsilanti by the Ypsilantian Job Printing House. A reprint was made in 1897, at Harbor Springs. The book is one of the chief sources of Ottawa and Ojibway history and mythology, and contains also Mr. Blackbird's personal and family history.

(Mrs. Smith, of the Dexter Leader, contributes the information that Chief Blackbird's home in Harbor Springs is now preserved and maintained by that city as a Historic House Museum.)

Better known than Blackbird was another Indian who occasionally visted Ann Arbor up to 1854. This was Okemos, an Ottawa who had been one of Tecumseh's chiefs in the War of 1812. He was said to be a nephew of Pontiac, but it may have been a clan rather than a blood relationship. Between 1830 and 1854, Okemos and his band were typical of the Indians known to our great-grandfathers. The days of their political and military importance were over, their forests were being cleared, and many of their native customs were weakening before the onset of white civilization. They were reduced to making a living by trading their native products, mainly baskets and furs, by begging, or even stealing, from the whites whom many of them still regarded as their enemies. A good many moved about seasonally in bands, and Okemos headed one of these, with headquarters near Lansing. Unlike some of the chiefs, however, he was able to get along with the whites. Perhaps the memories of his heroic past gave him comfort. Okemos was one of the first ever to sit for a photograph. About 1850 someone made an ambrotype of him, which still hangs on the wall of the State Library in Lansing. In spite of the ragged and nondescript clothing, this is the portrait of a leader of men.

The incoming whites were inclined to look upon the Indians as savages. Shortly after 1800 they were described by a high government official as merely over-running, not occupying, the western lands. Such have always been the relationships between people with a superior technology and those they have conquered. Neither side, until quite recently, have been students of folklore and anthropology. The Indians of Michigan, as all Indians for that matter, were civilized in their own way, with strict rules of conduct and manners, ideas of religion, and a sense of humor. The social unit of the Michigan tribes was the clan, an institution found in many parts of the world among peoples called primitive. The clans were at once political, social, and religious in character. Each one bore the name of some animal or natural phenomenon, somewhat in the manner that Michigan is known as the Wolverine State. Members of a clan had to marry outside, into another clan. However, there was an institution known as cross-cousin marriage in which marriage was nominally allowed only with the child of one's father's sister or mother's brother, not with the child of one's father's brother or mother's sister. This actually worked out as a prescribed courting relationship between the designated persons, a purely ceremonial relationship that did not necessarily culminate in marriage. This attitude also extended to the possible parents-in-law in the form of a prescribed respect, and this, after marriage, hardened into actual ceremonial avoidance of the parents-in-law. Among the Algonquians descent was in the male line. The naming of children was based on dreams during fasting, or the commemoration of some admired individual, as with us.

As long as the old folkways were still unbroken by contact with the whites, fasting was one of the major experiences of children. At a certain age the child was instructed to go out alone into the woods and abstain from food until he or she had had a dream, or a vision, or had heard a voice. There was no chicanery or forced imagination in this; it was a very real thing. The dream usually came, as could be expected under the circumstances, and the child took its name from the thing seen or heard, and acquired a philosophy of life in relation to it. This method of exploiting the resources

of the unconscious was also practised by adults, and it was an important source of strength for the problems of life. An Indian in the Upper Peninsula said to Professor Dorson of Michigan State College "It's like your education, the more you work on it the higher you get. Well, the Indians worked on their dreams." About six weeks ago, at the Ojibway village of Sagamock north of Lake Huron, in Ontario, an elderly Indian woman told me these dreams were like our radio,- the message, she meant to say, was as vivid. Usually the efficacy of the dream is the acquiring of power, the power of the animal or thing dreamt of, by the one who establishes rapport in this way. In fact this search for power of some sort lay at the foundations of the Indian's attitude toward the whole environment. It is derived from the dream obtained by fasting. Also power is part at least of the meaning of the word "Manitou," which is so well known in the Great Lakes region. The word siginfies something beyond human capability, a mysterious quality, something to be wondered at. There were individual manitous which might be animals or objects, and they were chiefly good, though some were bad. Manitou could be in the thunder or in the sunset, and here there would seem to be something of our own ideas of grandeur and beauty in the Indian word. One often runs across the words "Gitchi Manitou," quite prominent in literary works about the Indians. The phrase is used in hymn-books written in the Indian language, and of course is simply the native word for the Christian "God". It is not likely that the Algonquians entertained the concept of one, single, supreme Being in prehistoric times.

The chief character in the mythology of the Michigan Algonquians was Manabozho. There are several different spellings of the word, and much variation in the stories of his exploits. One of these is an account of the origin of the earth, in which Manabozho is in the top of a tree surrounded by a flood, or floating on the water on a piece of bark, with some animals. The creation of the land usually involves sending the otter or loon, or beaver to the bottom for some mud, and after their failures the muskrat finally succeeds. There is no reason to suspect Christian influence in the legend as a good many of the cosmologies of primitive peoples involve a flood out of which the land emerged. In addition to being a hero, Manabozho is often presented as highly mischievous and clever. This is the "trickster" complex found also among other Indian tribes of North America. Blackbird translates the word as "clown." The legends, which were and still are recited at story-telling gatherings, are often colored with what we would call obscenities. But the Indians had no Puritan background and such things did not seem exceptional to them. Consistant with this is the complete lack of any profanity in the Algonquian languages. Longfellow's great poem, "Hiawatha," is a composite of an Iroquois hero and the Algonquian Manabozho. The name "Hiawatha" itself is Iroquoian, altered quite a bit from the original, but the events of the poem are Ojibway, as related to Longfellow by Henry R. Schoolcraft..

Most of the Indians of the Great Lakes region are now Christian, but here and there, especially in the north, some few can be found who are, as their own people call them, pagans. A couple of years ago in connection with explorations in the Manitoulin region of Ontario, we made a trip by boat to the site of a former Ojibway

village, the Sagamock already mentioned. Nothing was left but the foundations of the church, and two cemeteries about a mile apart. One was the Christian cemetery and the other, well back in the woods on a small bay, was the pagan cemetery. There were about a hundred graves as indicated by the little wooden houses over each one, and from the condition of some of them this cemetery must have been in use for a century or more. At one end of the houses that were still standing was an upright post about three feet high, and on each was carved an animal or a bird, usually a bear or two varieties of bird, one resembling a chicken. These apparently represent the clan to which the deceased belonged. There were, and still are, bear and chicken clans, the latter relatively recent in origin. Also carved on the posts were the names of the deceased, and their dates. Two of the graves were as recent as 1950.

It is against such backgrounds as these that the history and folklore of Michigan Indians has to be understood. Folklore in particular presents an intimate view of Indian life, and one that is quite different from either the popular impression received by tourists in northern summer resorts, or from sentimental verse, of which there is an abundance, some of it written by the Indians themselves. Several people are at present active in study of the subject. Among them are: Professors R. M. Dorsan and K. E. Tiedke, of Michigan State College, who have published recently; Mrs. Gertrude Kurath of Ann Arbor, who is doing research on Indian music and dancing; and Dr. W. W. Florer, also of Ann Arbor. Dr. Florer has a series of publications about the work of German Lutheran missionaries among the Indians of the Saginaw region in the early part of the 19th century, and his translations preserve a great amount of descriptions of Indian customs which otherwise might have remained unknown for a long time.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
October 26, 1954

Our Society has lost ten members by death since our last listing:

Mrs. Daniel Sutton (Can someone supply the date for our records?)
Sept. 7, 1953 - Professor Ermine Cowles Case
Dec. 3, " - Richard A. Bury
Feb. 22, 1954 - Mrs. Martha Forbes
Mar. 17 " - William R. Stagg
Apr. 16 " - Mrs. Grace S. Raikes
June 13 " - Oswald Herz (Life Member)
July 11 " - Miss Sophie Gibbons
Sept. 5 " - Mr. S. L. Wyman
Nov. 7 " - Calvin Goodrich (Retired 10 years ago and living in North Carolina, but maintained his interest and his membership.)

MESSAGE FROM OUR PRESIDENT

500 Packard Street
Ann Arbor, Michigan
November 17, 1954

Have you signed up for a Museum Bond?

Pledges are coming in, but we need a lot more before we can proceed with this fine project.

If you have mislaid or destroyed the pledge form, please call me at NOrmandy 2-0936, so I can send you another. Remember -- no money now, just a pledge to buy a first mortgage bond at $100.00 (valid only if we establish the museum), payable over a 4-year period.

Our museum needs the support of every member, and don't forget we are making definite provision for a workshop where junior historians can carry out activities. Incidentally, since school opened, we have entertained over 50 teen-agers at our Bach School Museum, and more requests are coming frequently.

Won't you help make this house museum a reality, so we can contribute our share to the correcting of juvenile problems and the teaching of local history?

Howell Taylor
President

Address of Secretary-Treasurer: Mrs. I. William Groomes,
1209 S. State, Ann Arbor, Michigan